

The Monk by Tonbury

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Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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Summary:

The Party plays D&D at the cabin, and the damn place is too small for Hopper not to overhear.

1. Eavesdropper

Author's Note:

So - I assume the kids play 1st edition or AD&D, whereas I grew up with 3.5. While I'm dedicated to my craft, I am not so dedicated as to read the 300+ pages of old manuals to ensure my terminology/classes/etc. are consistent with 1st edition, so please forgive any discrepancies.

"Ok, nerds, prepare to be awestruck. This is what, 7d6 fire damage, one per level, plus - "

"First of all it's per caster level, you're multiclass. Second of all the spell is capped at 5d6, so even if - "

"That's such bullshit! So your girlfriend gets to incinerate everything in the room and I'm stuck taking potshots?"

"It's not bullshit, Mayfield, it's the rules. You're the one who insisted I help you pick out an ability set for a Zoomer, and that meant multiclassing. Lucas, a little help here?"

"Hell no. I'm recusing myself."

"Smart move, Stalker."

"Pah. Your glorious red mane is clouding his judgment. It's always better to min-max."

"...what the hell does it mean to min?"

"No - min-max. Not you, the word max. As in 'maximum.'"

"A min-max lecture coming from the bard..."

"Oooh, burn from Will the Wise!"

"7d6 fire damage?"

Hopper rubs his temples. The boys all laugh in response to El's quip, a helpful reminder as to why he's allowing all this in the first place. Socialization. It's good for her. If it's not safe for her to wander around town yet, at least she can enjoy herself with friends now and then. It's nice, he reminds himself. Worth a few hours of wanting to stab his eardrums through with a pen.

With anything, really, but the pen's handiest, and likely more effective than rolling up one of the case files in front of him and making a play for deafness-by-papercut. Callahan's handwriting is hard enough to parse without a litany of nerdspeak assaulting him from behind. Somehow this Dungeons & Dragons shit is even worse than the stereotypes had led him to believe. Jesus - when he was Wheeler's age he was fixated on a very different pair of Ds, that's for sure. Granted the thought of him thinking of El that way...

Hopper rubs his temples again.

Ok - the file. Thief only took items from the Valentine's display, so definitely a crime of opportunity. But in Callahan's interview notes from the -

"Woo, sneak attack! Multiclass that, asshole!"

"The guard goes down with a sickening groan. But when you move away you open yourself to an attack of opportunity from - "

Focus, Jim.

...right. Shopkeep said it happened after the doors were locked, and there was no sign that any of the locks had been tampered with, which suggests an inside -

"INSOLENT FOOLS! FACE THE WRATH OF ARIYBAR THE PROFANE! SOON, YOUR FLESH WILL ADORN MY HALLS AND YOUR ENTRAILS El stop looking at me like that, this is supposed to be, like, intimidating."

"Sorry. You're adorable."

Four dramatic groans.

- an inside job. Or else, uhh... what was he thinking about again? Right - or else the shopkeep is a dope or a liar. He skims the list of employees. Let's see - Carmichael, Hayes, Daniels... wasn't it somebody by the name of Daniels he locked up overnight just last week for -

"Pew pew! Pew pew!"

"Dustin that's not what Magic Missile sounds like."

"It could be."

"That's lasers. It's anachronistic."

"Oh so you're saying they didn't have sound effects in medieval times?"

"Anyway, while the bard and ranger are distracted by this fascinating conversation, Will you manage to get past the gnome to the door. Inside is a short hallway with a door at the end and a passageway off to - "

Hopper grinds his teeth. Ok. Maybe better to save the critical thinking for later. There's got to be some good old-fashioned paperwork around here somewhere. God knows Flo spends enough of her time berating him about it. He lights a cigarette, shuffles papers until lines requiring his signature manifest. Time off request for Powell - fine. Signed. Office supplies requests... let's see. Coffee's an office supply, right? Eh better safe than sorry. Oh, and he brought home all that extra tape for El around Christmas, after the, uh, mishap with the first round of present-wrapping. Is he out of staples? Not that he ever staples things, but they're fun to flick into the garbage can on slow days. Could probably use -

"Oh shit guys that's gotta be where the princess is. I have dibs when she decides to throw herself into the comforting arms of her rescuer."

"Dustin you're a halfling. If she throws herself into your arms you'll both fall over."

"Screw you."

“You open the door and there she is, golden hair shimmering in the sunlight pouring through the fortress window. Her room is tiny, with only a bed and a small wash basin, but even if it were enormous your eyes would be drawn straight to her. She’s as beautiful as the rumors said, and though she looks nervous at first she soon greets you with a grateful smile.”

Hopper closes his eyes and his forehead twitches. Office supplies. Think about office supplies.

“Fear not, m’lady! Your heroes have arrived to see you safely back to - ”

“So, like, is this it? Campaign done? I know we get a reward back in town, but I kind of figured this Profane guy would have a treasure trove or something. He had that whole side business with the cursed amulets, he must have earned - ”

“Hey, Zoomer, shut it. You’re killing the mood.”

“‘Actually,’ the princess interrupts, ‘he did mention something to one of his lieutenants about a store room behind the bookcase in his study...’”

“Now we’re talking. Lead the way, blondie.”

Envelopes. Probably need some of those. Hopper snuffs out his cigarette in an ashtray.

“Cure light wounds, anybody?”

“Me please.”

“Coming right up... 13 HP for the mage.”

“Thanks Will.”

“And I’ll dispel the bookcase too, in case it’s booby-trapped. Lucas, can you check for - ”

“Already on it. Ohhhh, natural 20 ladies and gentlemen. Hold your applause, please.”

“You make a mockery of the variety of traps both magical and mundane that guard what you soon confirm is a chamber filled with gold coins - more than you can possibly carry. They sparkle in the light from Dustin’s glowing lute.”

“I wink at the princess.”

“Jeez Dustin.”

“What? I didn’t do the growl, that’s called character development.”

“Fine. She smiles shyly back at you, smoothing the folds of her elegant silver-patterned dress. Meanwhile - ”

Hopper’s hands slam down on the tabletop before he can stop them. “Ok,” he says, with a tone so measured he considers it downright admirable, “that’s it.” He pushes himself up out of his chair and turns to see six startled faces looking up at him from the living room floor.

“...uh... what’s it, exactly? Sir?” Dustin asks after a moment. “I wasn’t going to... I mean - uh - I know there was some real sexual chemistry building there between me and the princess but we don’t typically roleplay the... I’m going to maybe stop talking now anyway how’s the paperwork going? Going good I bet, I bet you aced every page, sir, bet you really showed it who runs that office oh god I didn’t stop did I.”

Hopper blinks. “What - no. No, that’s not what I - Jesus.” He rubs his forehead. “I just have to say - this story makes no sense.”

Four pairs of eyes glance nervously at Mike. El looks at Hopper, taken aback. “Dad!”

Wheeler himself narrows his eyes, and Hopper sees hints of the anger that exploded that night last October. “Excuse me?”

Hopper raises his hands defensively and addresses his daughter. “I’m just being honest. Friends don’t lie, right? Look think of this as a learning opportunity,” he says, turning his head back to Wheeler, “a chance to get better, right?”

Mike crosses his arms. “What, exactly, doesn’t make sense about it?”

he challenges in the way only angst teenage boys can.

Hopper sighs. He really should just leave it.

He doesn't. "First of all, this whole fortress arrangement. The brilliant villain puts a half-dozen guards in his great hall but has nobody actually watching the princess's room? Not to mention his piles of gold? I mean speaking of gold - what is this guy's motive, anyway? Clearly he's a hoarder or something since this room is filled with cash but Jesus, if he's interested in padding his retirement fund why the hell didn't he try to ransom the girl back to her rich prick of a father? And the amulet side gig, for god's sake, if you're trying to make a mint selling trinkets why make them suck people's life force? That's not exactly a great long-term business strategy, when every product you sell screams 'I'm an evil asshole.'"

Lucas and Dustin share a mildly disturbed look. "...how much attention has he paying this whole time?" Lucas mutters.

Hopper ignores them. "And the princess - you said at the start the only reason she was out in the field instead of in her guarded ivory tower or whatever was because she was badly claustrophobic. You expect me to believe she's been kept in that, quote, 'tiny' room for a week and yet a few seconds after you open the door she's smiling and offering to show you around and playing footsie with the hobbit over there?"

"Actually, sir, technically I'm a halfling; Hobbits are specific to Tolkien's universe whereas halfling is a more generic - "

"I don't care," Hopper replies emphatically. "And I was going to just let it go, whatever, it's just a game and you're just a kid and bound to make a few mistakes now and then, except then you talked about her dress, and that was a step too far. The elegant silver embroidery shining in the light from mini-Dylan's glow-in-the-dark axe."

"Yeah, it's not technically glow-in-the-dark, it's imbued with a Light spell, which takes its luminescence from - " Will elbows Dustin and the boy stops talking.

Will's a good kid.

“One of the key pieces of evidence,” Hopper resumes, circling around the back of Wheeler’s little board set-up like he does with perps in the interrogation room, “that pointed your little band of misfits to Eeriebear’s fortress - ”

“Ariybar,” Dustin mumbles.

“ - to the ogre’s fortress, was - ”

“Actually he’s a gnome.”

Hopper’s hand slowly fists and he offers a smile as he feels a vein throb in his neck. “Thank you, Dustin.” He returns his gaze to the back of Wheeler’s head, who’s still sitting with crossed arms and hunched shoulders. “Now if I recall, that bit of evidence was a sizeable piece of torn cloth, covered in mud, found caught on a broken fence post in back of one of these amulet shops. Isn’t that right,” he asks the witnesses. Uh - other players.

El is glaring daggers at him, but Max nods cautiously. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“And why was that a clue?” he asks, crossing his arms, too. “Anybody?”

“...because it was from the princess’s dress,” Will answers shyly after a moment.

“It was. Now, it’s just barely possible that your Dungeon Leader failed to mention - yes, fine, Dungeon Master, and if you interrupt me one more time Henderson you’re never going to find out what it’s like to get through puberty - that Wheeler just failed to mention that there was a giant tear in the princess’s dress, though you’d think it’d be a detail the halfling horndog here would’ve been interested in. Or maybe there’s just so much material on medieval dresses that nobody’d notice if a little went missing, what do I know. But! What’d you have to do to figure out it was part of her dress?”

“It has a unique pattern,” Lucas replies.

“Right. But you couldn’t see that, at first.”

“No - we... had to wash it.”

“And what exactly did the Dungeon Master say when you washed it?”

El's eyes flash for a moment, and she glances guiltily at Mike before answering slowly, “That... the embroidery wouldn't return to its original shiny color no matter how much we scrubbed it.”

“No matter,” Hopper says, pacing back around to Mike's front, “how much,” he punctuates, “you scrubbed it. So what happened? Did the villain go to all the trouble of creating a new dress exactly matching the pattern of the old one? Did the dress somehow only get dirty exactly where it tore? You were only a few hours behind the villain at that point, and it hadn't rained since the day the princess was kidnapped, so there's no way the scrap got muddy after it was torn.

“It makes no sense,” he concludes.

He takes a deep breath, smirking triumphantly.

...God, he's an asshole.

The realization comes as soon as he stops talking. Jesus. The kids are just trying to have a fun time, and here he is critiquing Wheeler like he's a suspect. The two are hardly best buds, but they've settled into a comfortable detente after their confrontation the night El closed the gate, and at the end of the day Hopper's fond of him, is consistently impressed by Mike's patience and generosity when it comes to El and her idiosyncrasies. God knows El's crazy about him; Hopper's certainly not winning any points with her, spouting off like this.

He scratches the side of his nose - as close to embarrassed as he ever lets himself look these days - and after a moment works up the willpower to turn to apologize.

But instead of the angry or hurt or humiliated look he expects to see on Mike's face, there's a half-smile there instead. An appraising smile. A devious smile.

“Suddenly, the light reflected from the coins grows more intense, and for a moment you're all blinded, a sound like the chime of a high-pitched bell ringing in your ears. Roll Will saves.”

It's a moment before anyone speaks. "...what?" Lucas says, finally.

"Roll Will saves."

Hopper, left hanging, feels a little lost, and looks at Will. But after a moment everyone, not just Will, is rolling one of those damn multi-sided dice, and reporting some numbers that hold no meaning for him.

"When the light fades, you find yourselves frozen in place. The coins have vanished; sinister circular runes line the chamber in their place. And where the princess stood moments before now stands Ariybar, cackling loudly.

"You fools! You really thought a great Illusionist like myself would choose to confront you in a contest of brute force?"

"Fuck me," Dustin says, dragging his hands down his cheeks.

"Hey," Hopper warns, glancing at El. He knows it's almost certainly futile to try and safeguard her vocabulary at this point, but he's at least going to pretend to qualify as good adult supervision. Granted, the way El is staring at Mike with a proud smile on her face, Hopper isn't sure she even heard.

"What the hell is going on?" Max demands.

Wheeler shifts his attention to her. "Ahh, yes. Where are my manners. Welcome to my ritual chamber. I've spent years perfectly attuning it to the outer planes in anticipation of this day."

Lucas tightens his hands into fists. "What happens today?"

"Today, I finally bring my master home from exile. Today, he will take his place as the rightful king of this wayward nation."

"You don't mean - " Will begins.

"Oh, I do. Today, the Tyrant returns."

Everybody gasps as though this means something. Hopper just looks bemused.

“Through the amulets, I’ve gathered enough vessels to activate the ritual. Once I begin, everyone who has come into direct contact with one of the cursed tokens will become subservient to the Chosen One - the Tyrant’s secret offspring. Then it’s simply a matter of channeling their life force here in this chamber, and my master will walk the earth once more.”

“Wait - wait wait. The Tyrant was a human, you’re a gnome. You can’t be his offspring... right?” Lucas makes a face.

“Oh, no. Not I. I spent many years trying to discover his offspring’s identity. Imagine my surprise when I learned she herself was unaware of her parentage,” Mike says, turning his attention to Max.

Max looks at him blankly, before her eyes widen. “Wait - me? But I’m... my character’s an orphan. My father died in a - ”

“In a fire, yes. Not entirely untrue; when the Tyrant was banished, a great fire swept across the capital.’ Max, you feel a strange tingling in your spine, like some kind of dark energy is running up and down your body.”

“I draw my bow,” Lucas says with a scowl.

“Can’t move.”

“She won’t help you,” El says, her voice certain but her eyes shooting Max a questioning glance.

“Um, duh,” Max confirms. “My dad sounds like a real asshole. I’m not channeling anything.”

“As I expected. Reports of the Zoomer’s exploits suggested someone with views that diverged significantly from her father’s. No matter. I’ll simply Dominate you after the ritual begins.”

“Excuse me?” Hopper interjects.

“What? - oh, god, no,” Mike says, blushing, “it’s a - it’s a spell.”

“Though hypothetically with the control it gives you it’d be possible to use it for stuff like - ” Will elbows Dustin again. (Good kid. Jesus.)

“Where is the princess?” Will demands, surprisingly forcefully.

“Uh - right. ‘Her? She’s insignificant. I needed a way to get the Zoomer here, to the chamber. When I heard she had fallen in with the king’s favorite errand boys, it was simply a matter of contriving a circumstance that would cause the king to send them my way. The princess is currently resting comfortably at a farm not far from here. After the Tyrant returns I see no reason not to release her.”

“We won’t let you get away with this,” El says, her eyes narrowed. For a moment Hopper’s afraid he’ll need to make a run for the tissues, but nothing falls over of its own accord or flies across the room.

“Ariybar cackles as the glyphs along the wall turn a sickly green. ‘There’s nothing you can do to stop me. You’re trapped, and I have everything I need to complete the ritual. You should feel privileged, to witness the dawn of a new era!’”

Will grips his knees tightly. “What can we do? Can we move?”

“Nothing but your mouths.”

“Does anyone have any spells prepared that don’t have somatic components?”

El shakes her head.

“Stupid goddamn multiclassing,” Max mutters.

“Uh... Feather Fall?” Dustin offers, presumably unhelpfully given the unenthused responses from the others.

“Well. This is it. We’re finally, truly doomed,” Lucas says, leaning back with resignation.

Max grunts. “This sucks. It’s unfair! It’s an impossible situation.”

Wheeler gives a half-smirk. “Well... maybe there’s one way you might be able to pull through.”

Will leans forward. “What is it?”

“Well... there was someone who figured out Ariybar’s ploy. So it’s probably safe to say he didn’t get caught.”

Dustin frowns. “Who? We’re all...”

Hopper scratches his chin. All the kids are accounted for. Was there some other ally they mentioned he’s forgetting about? That weird carriage driver with the beard? No, he was killed by that jello cube thing. (Jesus, this game is weird.) Seems kind of lazy to let one of Wheeler’s characters solve the problem at the eleventh hour, anyway. Who could...

It’s at this point he realizes they’re all staring at him.

“Uh - what’s up?” he asks, afraid he already knows the answer.

“He doesn’t even have a character sheet,” Lucas points out.

“We can use some default stats,” Wheeler says, pulling open one of those massive rule books.

“Uh - kids, I have a lot of work to do - uh - for instance there’s case files, and... ordering, uh, staples...”

“Please Dad?” El asks, eyes wide. “You’re our only hope.”

She doesn’t always call him Dad - it’s something they’re both still getting used to - and he’s very aware it’s no accident she’s using it now, which only makes it more irritating that he already knows it’s going to work.

“Fuck me,” he says under his breath.

“That’s the spirit, sir,” Dustin says as Hopper drags one of the kitchen chairs out into the living room.

Notes for the Chapter:

First fic in this fandom, and first fic on ao3!
Hopefully it's just assumed these days that Kudos and reviews are wildly appreciated, but in case it's not: Kudos and reviews are wildly appreciated!

2. Newcomer

“A Monk. One of those quiet-types with robes and fancy handwriting?” Hopper looks at Wheeler skeptically.

“It’s not like - no, not a medieval monk. They’re like...”

“Monks believe in perfecting themselves, physically and spiritually, in pursuit of enlightenment,” Dustin advises sagely, balancing potato chips on four of his fingertips.

“And that sounds like me to you, huh?”

“Um - yeah, of course it does,” Wheeler responds cheerily. Hopper’s going to pretend he doesn’t notice the glance at his stomach, because otherwise one thing will lead to another, and at the end of the day he understands that it’s never ok to beat up a child.

“They also believe in punching people real hard in the face,” Lucas adds dryly.

Hopper tilts his head. Alright, he’ll give them that one. “And this role, or whatever - that determines what I can do?”

“Your class. And yeah, kind of,” Wheeler replies, turning one of those massive rulebooks toward him. “They determine your hit dice, and your ability set, and how much experience you need for certain effects, and what - ”

“Whoa, whoa, ok. Slow down. You promised me I wouldn’t have to look at any charts.”

Wheeler looks disappointed for a moment, but then shrugs as if to say ‘your loss.’

“So. Monk,” Hopper resumes. “That’s the closest thing this game has to a cop?”

Nobody responds for a couple of seconds. Dustin becomes very interested in his hat, Lucas starts idly tapping Max’s jeans with his pencil’s eraser (she grimaces affectionately; Hopper hadn’t known

that was something a person could do), and Will concentrates intently on a doodle he's been sketching in the corner of his character sheet. "Sure," Mike says eventually.

Hopper glances at El, who shrugs shyly without making eye contact. "Do me a favor, kids," he says after a moment. "Don't ever commit a crime that requires you to lie to the police. It's not your strong suit."

El has the decency to look embarrassed, but Wheeler just scratches the back of his head. "Well - ok, maybe technically there's another class that's more like a police officer. But it's taken."

"You can't have more than one of each?"

"Well you could, I guess, but... *we* don't."

Of course they don't. "Ok. So which one is it. I assume it's not maestro over there - " Dustin waggles his eyebrows helpfully. " - or red's made-up speed demon, or El's witch."

"Mage," El corrects gravely.

"Right. So that leaves the clerk, or - "

"Cleric," Will says, crossing his arms. Jesus, kid can glare as good as his mother when he wants to.

" - or bandana over there."

"Lucas is a Ranger. And no, it's not any of those."

"Well," Hopper concludes patiently, "I may not be a math whiz, but I'm pretty sure that's all five of you. There some invisible player here I don't know about? Bad manners not to introduce a guest to the host, kid."

"Um, hello?" Wheeler says. "There's six of us here."

Hopper frowns. "I thought you were the, uh. The Dungeon Master."

"Right now, sure. We trade off sometimes, though."

“Yeah but Mike’s the best at it,” Will notes matter-of-factly. In response Wheeler does his best not to look cocky, which isn’t saying much.

Dustin gives a half-shrug. “Eh, for stories. Lucas still kills it when it comes to running tactical scenarios.”

“And yet he couldn’t stalk for shit,” Max laments teasingly, flicking Lucas’s temple, who flinches and grins. (Hopper decides he doesn’t want to know.)

“Anyway - I’m a Paladin, which is probably the *closest* thing to law enforcement. But I mean that’s just based on specs and general outline. Really backstory is more important, and Monks have to be Lawful, which fits the police, right?”

Hopper smells bullshit - exhibit A, there’s no goddamn Paladin in the group *at the moment*, and since he doesn’t expect he’ll be investing in a set of mutated dice anytime soon why the hell does it matter if he plays one - but whatever. He’s doing this for El. Stop arguing and get it over with, Jim. “Fine. But let me state for the record, you’re missing out on a real bonding opportunity, Wheeler. Don’t you think El’d love it if her two favorite men had matching classes?”

El smiles widely and Wheeler looks embarrassed, so as far as Hopper’s concerned he’s 2 for 0.

“Alright, so I’m physically disciplined, I punch people, I’m law-abiding. That enough to get started here or what?”

“Lawful. Different from law-abiding,” Dustin amends in what Hopper supposes is meant to be a professorial tone.

“How you figure.”

“It’s part of your alignment. I mean yeah, Lawful people usually are law-abiding, but it’s more than that.”

Hopper rubs his temples preemptively. “Alignment.”

“Mhm. Everyone has an alignment. It’s a system on two axes; on the one side you’ve got your Lawful, Neutral, Chaotic, on the other it’s

Good, Neutral, and - ”

“I know you’re not showing me a chart but now I’m picturing one in my head, which I’ve decided counts. Why don’t you just... tell me what you all are and I can be that too.”

Will’s gone back to doodling - the kid’s intimidatingly good, even if he puts the timid in intimidating; Hopper feels mildly unsettled when draws, sometimes, half-convinced that one day he’ll look over Will’s shoulder and see more of those damn vines spilling out onto the page. Anyway he’s doodling, and doesn’t look up when he replies. “We’re different. Mike and I are Lawful Good, Dustin and Max are Chaotic Good, and El and Lucas are Neutral - ”

“ - Good, yeah, I get it, you’re the good guys. Fine. So I’m Lawful Good?”

“If you want to be. You could try Lawful Neutral if you’re feeling edgy. *The law applies to good and evil alike!* That kind of thing. Like Judge Dredd, or... man, is there *anyone* in Star Wars who’d be Lawful Neutral?” Wheeler asks, looking mildly distressed.

“It’d be lost on me anyway, kid,” Hopper reassures.

“Inspector Javert’s Lawful Neutral,” Dustin provides.

Hopper grunts; he took Sara to see that show, once, when she was too little to understand much of what was happening. “You never struck me as one for musicals.”

“What? I have a soft spot for *Les Mis*. My mom likes it. Besides, I *am* a Bard. I dreaaaaamed a dreaaaaam in time gone byyyyyyy - ”

“Just - god - please. Don’t,” Hopper pleads quietly.

God spurns him. Will joins in without looking up from his doodling, forehead creasing with due melodrama. “When hooooope was hiiiiigh and liiiiiife worth liviiiiing. I dreaaaaamed that loooove would never dii - ow!” the boys say simultaneously as Max and Lucas, perfectly choreographed, smack them upside the head. At least El’s laughing.

“So can we get started or - ” Hopper and Mike both say, overtop each

other.

El laughs harder.

Yes, though, it turns out, they can.

“Unbeknownst to the party - unbeknownst even to Ariybar himself - there’s another witness to the dark proceedings underway in the ritual chamber. A tall man with a hard gaze lurks just outside the secret doorway, having followed the brave adventurers here at the behest of the Order of the Golden Shield. The Order, a band of warriors dedicated to seeking justice across the land, sent their top operative - known only as Chief - to ensure the safe return of the princess, given - um - some... creative solutions, that this particular group has been known to employ on occasion.”

“Look,” Dustin interjects, “if that goat hadn’t looked at me funny I never would have had to - ”

“Would you shut it about the goat already,” Lucas hisses. “Besides, he’s probably talking about the time El first discovered her powers and almost burnt down the entire Enchanted Forest.”

El makes a face at him. “Better than Doomstoll.”

“Yeah, Lucas. I don’t remember El spending half an hour flirting with a young maiden who turned out to be a kobold in disguise,” Will teases.

Max raises an eyebrow.

“In my defense,” Lucas says, holding up his hands, “Mike said she was hot.”

“Yeah? What’d she look like?”

“Oh you know. Dark hair, petite. Dainty. Just how I like ‘em,” he says with a grin. Max shoves him.

“Yeah except actually she looked like if a wet rat had sex with a lizard,” Dustin notes. “Not sure what that says about you Max.”

“Doesn’t say anything about me. Just shows how pitifully desperate this nerd used to be.”

“Guys can we focus here? - So, Chief, you’re listening in and have just heard Ariybar explain his plan. It’s clear from the way the runes along the wall are reacting that his ritual is about to begin. What do you do?”

Hopper finds himself feeling surprisingly nervous all the sudden, and it doesn’t help that they’re all staring at him expectantly. “Do I get choices, or something?”

Wheeler shakes his head. “You can do anything you want. As long as it doesn’t go against the rules.”

He grunts. “So the Dungeon Master is Lawful, is what you’re saying.”

Wheeler smiles. “What do you do?” he repeats.

Hopper glances at El, who nods encouragingly. “I, uh... do I have a gun?”

“What do you think,” Wheeler responds, looking unimpressed.

“Ok, fine. A weapon?”

The Dungeon Master taps his fingertips against the cover of a rulebook, mouth twisted in thought, before he picks up a die and rolls it. “Yeah, ok. Traditionally Monks don’t rely on weapons and armor, but we’ll say you’ve got a knife with you. You’ll do more damage with your fists, though, if you decide to attack.”

“Does he have Quivering Palm?” Dustin asks excitedly.

“What? No. That’s level 13 and above.”

“Yeah, but he’s older. More *experienced*. ”

“Age doesn’t matter when it comes to level.”

“Yeah, I know, but...”

"No. Overruled. He's the same level as the rest of you." Kid takes to authority a little too well, Hopper thinks with a frown. And judging by the impish smile his daughter's sending Wheeler's way, she likes it.

"So where's everyone standing, relative to me," he interrupts, before his mind can start going all sorts of bad places.

"Ok - the party is about 15 feet into the room. Ariybar is hovering a foot or so off the ground about 10 feet in front of them. Here," he says, pulling a board of sorts out into the center of the floor space, "we probably should've set this up earlier. Each square is 5 feet by 5 feet. With your speed you can move 30 feet per combat round - but we're not in combat yet, so, ignore that for now. Uhh so this one's Ariybar," he says, picking up a statuette of a gnarled little creature and placing it on the board. "And here's Will, El, Max, Lucas, Dustin... and this one's you."

The figurine he chooses is a ripped old bald guy with a big stick. Kind of like if Gandhi had decided to skip the hunger strikes and spent all his afternoons at the gym instead. "And he doesn't know I'm here yet."

"Right."

Hopper scratches his neck, realizes he missed a spot shaving. Eh, it's the weekend. "How long until this ritual thing is complete?"

"You don't know. You're not a caster."

"Wait, wait, wait. You don't need to be a caster to know about spells," Dustin contests.

"Yeah, but this is a unique ritual."

Lucas makes a face. "That's weak. He didn't get to pick his backstory or skills, how do we know he doesn't have a knowledge concentration or something?"

"Because he doesn't!"

"Weak."

“Well - Ariybar’s an illusionist. So an arcane caster,” Will notes. “A Monk might know about divine magic, but probably not arcane.”

“*Thank* you,” Wheeler says, as Dustin and Lucas both appear to reluctantly concede, leaning back.

“Wise,” Will reminds with a shy smile, tapping his forehead.

“So are you going to do something, or...” Max prods.

“Yeah,” Hopper grunts, clearing his throat. “Just a couple more questions first.”

Mike toys with something behind his little Dungeon Master wall/board/whatever. “The runes flair dramatically; you get the sense you don’t have much time left. I’ll give you one more question.”

“Just one?”

“Yeah.”

Hopper grunts again, and finds he isn’t above waiting a few extra breaths as the group stares at him expectantly. Dramatic tension, or some shit. He slouches in his chair to get closer to eye level with the group seated on the floor. Also because it’s a Saturday and he’s lazy. “What’s he wearing.”

Wheeler frowns, and Dustin and Lucas glance at each other. Max looks ready to be offended and/or disgusted; El just looks confused.

“ - sorry?” Wheeler replies eventually.

“I said, what’s he wearing.”

“You mean like what equipment he has, or - ”

“Is that how you take it when someone asks you what you’re wearing to the school dance? They want to know if you’re bringing a sword? I mean exactly what I said.”

After a few more skeptical seconds, Wheeler shrugs. “Ok - um, he’s got a somewhat dirty white tunic covered by lightweight leather

armor. Brown pants. A cloth belt and muddy boots, and a red robe, undecorated but definitely the best-maintained part of his outfit. There's a pendant around his neck, a blue stone on a gold chain."

"And that's it?"

Wheeler looks uncomfortable for what might be the first time since Hopper got dragged into this mess, and it takes a little effort to keep from smirking. "I mean... that you can see. Yeah."

Hopper nods. "Alright. Here goes nothing," he mutters. "I step out into the room."

"Do you sneak?"

He shakes his head. "Looks to me like someone needs to interrupt him. So I interrupt him."

Wheeler nods. "Ok. What do you say?"

Hopper rubs at the patch of stubble on his neck. "Uh - so I just say it to you?"

"Yeah. Pretend I'm Ariybar."

Hopper's not going to do that, because a teenage supervillain in an argyle sweater isn't something he's sure he can take seriously. So he focuses on preparing his response instead. "Stop right there," he says with as much authority as he's willing to muster.

"Ariybar's sinister smirk is interrupted by a confused frown as he looks toward you, and the runes dim slightly. 'What's this? Another hapless soul for my master to consume?'"

Hopper's eyebrow twitches. The kid has a flair for the theatrical, no doubt, but his voices could use some work. "I'm here to stop you," he says with something like heroism, reevaluating all the choices in his life that have led him to this moment.

"Who the hell are you?" Dustin asks emphatically.

"...what do you mean, who the hell am I."

“No - my character says that.”

“Wheeler just told you who I was. A Monk from the League of the Gold Medalists or whatever.”

“Order of the Golden Shield,” Mike says impatiently. “Like a police badge?”

“I *know* he said that,” Dustin resumes, his professor voice on display again. “But you’re not supposed to metagame. ‘What is metagaming,’ you’re no doubt asking yourself. Well, that’s an excellent question, Chief Hopper’s hypothetical internal monologue. Metagaming means acting on knowledge you have as a player but that your character wouldn’t know. It’s like cheating.”

“So in addition to knowing all the stuff in those books you also have to *not* know things to play this game.”

“Pretty much. So like I said - ‘Who the hell are you?’”

Hopper closes his eyes, rubs the corner of one with his thumb. “I’m from the Order of the, uh...”

“Golden Shield.”

“ - Golden Shield, I was about to say that. I followed you twerps here to make sure you actually got the job done.”

“Are you kidding me? The king doesn’t trust us? After everything we’ve done for him?” Dustin exclaims, affronted.

“I mean, to be fair...” Max says, waving her hand in a circle.

“...ok, so I admit this isn’t our finest moment. But still. I thought we had a bond.”

“Fool. All you’ve accomplished is ensuring you’ll share your friends’ fate!” Ariybar turns his attention to you and begins to cast a spell.”

“Not my friends,” Hopper mutters.

“Everyone’s piling it on today,” Dustin grumbles.

It takes Hopper a moment before he realizes that Will's holding out a die pinched between two fingers in front of him. "You'll need this," the boy says, nodding at Wheeler, who's flipping rapidly through pages in his rulebook.

Hopper holds out a hand for it, and Will drops it in. Well, he thinks, staring down at the lump of plastic resting on his palm, there's no going back now. He's about to lose his nerdginity.

"Roll a Reflex save. - Uh, just, roll that," Mike corrects when he looks up, before Hopper can ask for clarification.

Here goes nothing.

The die cracks its knuckles against the floor and comes to rest next to an abandoned pretzel stick. "17."

"Nice. A bright, crackling beam of energy aimed at your chest slices through the air, but as though on instinct you angle your body out of the way in the fraction of a second it takes for the spell to leave his fingertips. The wall behind you sparks and sizzles, burnt at the point of impact."

"Holy shit, did he just dodge a bolt of lightning?" Max remarks.

"Monks get Evasion as a class ability."

"Badass," El says. Oh good. She's picked up another one.

Granted, it *was* kind of badass.

"Punch him in the face," Lucas suggests enthusiastically, but Hopper raises a hand to shush him.

"Wheeler said *I* wouldn't know anything about the ritual. What about the rest of you? You can still talk, right?"

Will nods. "El should be able to roll a Knowledge check for it."

"Good luck," Lucas mutters.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hopper says, defensively on El's

behalf.

"It just means her character's, uh... you know, more of an emotionally-driven Mage. Not really the... bookish type."

El sticks her tongue out at him as she picks a die to roll.

"Ariybar grimaces. 'Dodge all you want. There's nothing you do to stop me! In a few moments, it'll all be over! My master will - '"

"Yeah, listen, I heard the whole villain rant from the doorway there, so we can skip it, thanks. El?"

"One-two. Plus two. So, one-four. Fourteen," she corrects when he gives her a look, rolling her eyes. They've had several disagreements where she's made the case that her numbering system makes more sense in the end, an argument he's found frustratingly difficult to refute - but if she's going to be out in the world soon, she needs to learn to blend in, and that's not how one-four-year-olds speak.

"Ok," Wheeler says, "so you don't know anything about this specific ritual, but you know an invocation spell like this one usually requires a focus component, and takes about a minute of concentration to cast."

"So... the focus component is the pendant. Duh," Max supplies.

Hopper craves a smoke, but the pack is back over on the table, which means not only would he have to unslouch to reach it, he'd have to *stand*. Meh. "Before your little plot twist back there I'd have made a comment about how stupid this guy is to wear an important part of his plan around his neck, out in the open like that. But I figure it must be rigged or something. That's a thing, right? Magic booby traps or whatever?"

"It's possible," Dustin agrees.

"Ok. Then I pull out that knife you said I have."

"Ariybar smirks. 'You expect to take me down with *that*?'"

Hopper rubs his nose. "No. But I think it's going to get me that little

bauble around your neck.”

“Ha! Do your worst, hireling! This chain can’t be cut by any blade, let alone a common - ”

“I circle round to Red and put the knife against her neck.”

“Whoa, what the hell,” Max exclaims, wide-eyed, and the rest of the group’s comments blend into the kind of cacophony Hopper usually associates with interruptions to bingo night down at the church on Thursday nights, whenever he’s called into to stop two octogenarians from tearing each other’s hair out.

“What are you - what are you doing?” Ariybar demands.”

“Well,” he says, crossing his arms, “as I understand it your plan hinges on taking control of the, uh, Zoomer here. Seems like all our problems go away once she’s out of the picture.”

“Dad!” El hisses; there’s no affection in the word this time. He ignores her.

“You... you wouldn’t dare take an innocent life!”

“Hey,” he shrugs, “ *they* ’re the Good guys. I’m the Neutral guy.”

“Ariybar stops levitating, feet touching the ground as he approaches you, hands raised. ‘Let’s - let’s be reasonable. Surely we can come to some arrangement. One where you don’t need to kill an innocent girl.’”

“Uh, my character’s a *woman*, thank you very much.”

“God Mayfield that’s *not* the point,” Wheeler says, either as himself or as Ariybar, Hopper can’t decide.

“Like I said,” Hopper interrupts, “this knife’s gonna get me that stone. Hand it over, and I’ll let her live.”

“Ariybar hesitates. After a moment, he reaches behind his neck and unfastens the chain, and then slips the pendant off. He plays with it a moment before slowly approaching and extending a hand to give it to

you.”

“I keep my knife to her throat as I reach out to take it. Uh, I say, ‘Any funny business and she’s a goner.’” Jesus, he sounds like a 40s gangster movie. “‘You saw how fast I moved back there; don’t think my hand is any slower.’ - That’s, uh, true, right?” he asks as an aside. Dustin gives him a thumbs-up.

“Ariybar scowls and drops the stone into your hand.”

“Good. Now back off.”

“He does.”

“Woo-hoo!” Lucas cheers. “Nice thinking, Chief.”

Hopper twists his mouth and studies Wheeler, who’s managing a decent poker face. “Gave it up too easily,” he mutters in reply, and then, experiencing a sudden burst of energy, sits up nearly an entire half an inch. “Is there a way to be sure this thing isn’t another illusion?”

“You can roll to disbelieve it.”

He does, using the same bulky die as before when directed. “19.”

Lucas whistles. “Damn, man. Talk about beginner’s luck.”

“You can’t be 100% positive your attempt worked, but you feel confident that the stone you’re holding is real. It pulses with an otherworldly heat; magic is definitely flowing through it.”

“If I have quick hands, does that mean I have quick fingers? You know, uh, like...”

“Sleight-of-hand skills?” Wheeler asks. Hopper nods. “Sure. I think that’s reasonable.”

“Alright. Then I’m going to lower my knife and walk around behind the rest of the group. Will, do you still have that sack you were carrying around earlier?”

Will is wide-eyed and more animated than Hopper's ever seen him; he's been that way all day, not including play breaks, every time Hopper's looked up to check in on the story. Uh - on the players, he means. Anyway, it's kind of adorable. "My satchel? Yeah. It's pretty full, though."

"That's fine. I'm gonna sneak the stone into the top of the bag as I pass by."

"Ok. Give me another d20 roll."

"11."

Half the party groans, and for a second Hopper assumes he's failed the roll or something. He reevaluates when El, smiling widely, leans forward to give the slightly pinkening Wheeler a peck on the lips.

"Every. Single. Eleven," Dustin complains.

Hopper grimaces. "Maybe cut the PDA while I'm playing," he suggests firmly. He tries his best not to get too overbearing-father-figure with El these days, especially when it comes to Wheeler - part of him does feel guilty for keeping them separated for a year, and an even deeper part of him has internalized the sting of El's recitation of numbered days, the terrible realization that, at least on some occasions, she saw him as a warden more than a protector - but that doesn't mean he won't enforce boundaries where appropriate.

El shakes her head at him, though, still looking giddy. "Tradition," she states plainly, and directs her smile at him.

It's not fair that she can melt his heart with a look like that. His heart is supposed to be a big, hairy, manly heart, a heart like weathered concrete, and, you know, a whole bunch of other clumsily mixed metaphors. (His physician has other adjectives for it, but that's neither here nor there.) He mutters something unintelligible and turns his attention back to the game. "So..."

Mike unflusters himself. "Yeah. The stone goes in without incident." He makes a roll behind his wall/shield/screen.

"Good," Hopper says. "Now all that's left is for you to release these..."

adventurers, and point me in the direction of the princess.”

“You said you crossed the room?” Wheeler confirms.

“Uh... yeah, I guess I’d have to, right? If I went behind Will?” He moves Buff Gandhi to a new position on the board.

“Then Ariybar mutters an incantation and the runes flash white. Give me another d20 roll.”

“...4.” Beginner’s luck, huh.

“The light fades and you find yourself in the same state as the others, frozen in place.”

“Son of a bitch,” Dustin sighs.

“ - I mean, is anyone surprised?” Lucas asks with frustration. “What exactly was your plan, here? You basically gave up your hostage, which was the only thing stopping him from...” He trails off as Hopper fixes him with a death glare.

Ariybar picks up for him, though. “‘You arrogant fool!’ Ariybar exclaims, approaching you.” Wheeler has a cocksure smile on his face, and Hopper has another urge to exercise his Monkly proclivities for introducing smug looks to closed fists. “‘Assuming I’d just let you leave, even after you abandoned your advantage? After I’d given you my pendant?’ He cackles and crosses to Will.”

“I bare my teeth at him,” Will says, demonstrating with feeling.

“He reaches into your pack. ‘And this - *this* was supposed to fool me? This stone is bound to me; I would know its precise whereabouts even had you carried it halfway around the world!’ He pulls out the stone and backs away.”

Max shakes her head. “Damn it. I really thought we had him there, for a minute.” She kicks the side of the couch. “Well. Nice knowing you, everybody.”

“Still think you made it too damn hard,” Dustin mutters at Wheeler.

“Well the last three sessions you said everything was too *easy*! What was I supposed to - ”

“Come on, guys,” Will says, with the weary determination of a boy who has *seen things*. The thought occurs to Hopper as something humorous, at first, until he remembers that of course Will *has* seen things, felt things, lived through things, beyond anything he can really understand. “The Chief did a great job giving us a second chance. There must be something...” he says, though it’s more of a plea than anything else.

“No one’s saying he didn’t,” Lucas assures. “But we’re all paralyzed, now. Unless another one of our parents has been secretly listening in outside and decides to join in, I’m pretty sure we’re well and truly screwed.”

“The runes turn green again as Ariybar lifts off the ground; judging by the intensity of the light, he’s picking up where he left off.”

El looks at Wheeler pleadingly, who looks pained for a moment before he bites his lip and shifts his divider to block her gaze. By the time she turns that gaze to Hopper, it’s only gotten more intense. “We have to do something!”

He keeps his focus on Wheeler, stone-faced.

The kid glances around the faces of the others - apologetically? To check for last-minute strokes of genius, maybe - before he takes a deep breath and announces, “The green of the runes becomes absolutely toxic and pulses once, twice, three times, then fades to lifeless black. ‘IT IS DONE!’ Ariybar announces, cackling wildly as he settles to the floor. Max, that sinister energy you felt earlier consumes you entirely - hundreds of souls enslaved to your will, and beyond them a looming darkness in the back of your mind: your father, the Tyrant, ready to receive them, to be - ”

Hopper clears his throat. “I can talk, right?”

Mike frowns. There’s silence for a second or two as everyone pulls themselves out of the moment. “...I mean... yeah. I guess. Everybody else could, so...”

“Good. Zoomer, do me a favor, would you, tell this guy to shut the hell up?”

Max frowns. Everybody frowns. “...I don’t...” She glances uncertainly at Lucas, then at Wheeler, then at Hopper. “What do you...”

Hopper sits up so that he can lean forward, resting his elbows on his knees and interlacing his fingers. “Will, remind us what the last item you put in your bag was?”

Will creases his brow, looks decidedly confused. “Um...”

“I’ll help jog your memory. Unless I’m mistaken, it was right after you all found that scrap from the princess’s dress.”

Will blinks. “In the back of the amulet shop. Yeah, that’s right. I picked up one of the amulets so that we could test...” His eyes widen.

“That’s right. You did. To test its effects, or something. And I seem to recall that this - what was it he called me? Arrogant fool? - that this *arrogant fool* said anyone who’s touched one of these amulets would be under the Zoomer’s control as soon as his ritual finished. Your pack was pretty full, and that amulet you picked up would’ve been on top. Poor guy should’ve worn gloves. But we know he didn’t. Wheeler said he’d described everything Ariybar was wearing.” Hopper lets the smirk he’s been sitting on creep out onto his face.

Max blinks. “Stop talking!” she shouts suddenly.

Hopper blinks back, until he realizes she’s addressing Ariybar, following Hopper’s advice. Wheeler realizes it too, after a minute, and then it’s his turn to blink. “Uhh - um...” He lets out a single, breathy, kind of dumbstruck laugh. “Yeah. - Yeah, ok.

“I guess Ariybar shuts the hell up.”

~

Afterwards there’s laughter and high-fives and a surplus of dessert waffles, in-jokes and anecdotes and way too many sci-fi references. At one point (and, admittedly, with the help of a couple of beers) Hopper finds himself getting a little too involved watching what’s

gradually turned into a dramatic reenactment of the group's last adventure, to the extent that when they slay the big bad he actually lets out the kind of whoop he usually reserves for hometown football games.

Wheeler's the last to leave, as usual. And, as usual, Hopper can't help eavesdropping on the extended goodbye.

"That was fun."

"Yeah - yeah, it was. Sorry if it was weird, bringing Hopper in like that."

"Mm-mm. It was good. He had fun."

"I guess so. - You know he was actually pretty good."

"He's the best. Like you."

A break in the dialogue. No mystery as to the cause.

"I'll radio you tomorrow?"

"Tonight."

"Deal." Hopper can hear the smile in Wheeler's voice.

"Not promise?" He can hear the teasing in hers.

"Can't hurt to shake things up now and then."

"Fine." Another pause. "*Deal*."

And then he's off.

~

End of day the following Monday Flo stops him in the hall as he's pulling on his jacket. "Chief," she says, frowning down through her glasses at a piece of paper in her hand.

"What can I do for you, Florence?" he says pleasantly.

She glances up at him skeptically. “You’re chipper.”

“That’s because I’m leaving.”

She makes an unamused noise, which he likes to think means she’s amused. “I was just going over the office supplies requests. Tell me, what do we need - ” she adjusts her bifocals - “‘polyhedral dice’ for, exactly?”

Hopper glances around the office - no one else around to overhear, thank god - and scratches his chin. “Training exercises,” he answers after a moment, as he pushes past her and out the door, a small smile playing at his lips.

Notes for the Chapter:

This kind of feels like it became a beginner's guide to D&D. I can live with that.

Originally I was thinking this fic would be 3 chapters, but after ruminating on it I've decided this makes for a stronger end point. Less is more and all that. Plus I'm kind of eager to write something a little more serious next, a nice ol' angsty Mileven fic I've been brainstorming for a little while. Was fun to try my hand at something more humorous and dialogue-driven, though.

(What follows is nerd shit most people won't care about; you may excuse yourself from this author's note at any time.)

So I realized after posting Chapter 1 that the kids probably play 2nd edition, based on the fact that they refer to El as a Mage instead of a Magic-User, which was mildly distressing to discover because Monk apparently wasn't a class in 2nd edition. But because it was a 1st edition class (and returned for 3rd edition) I have to imagine there were supplementary materials that added Monks back in for 2e, or if not I can easily imagine them

homebrewing the class based on its 1st edition characteristics.

I also learned that neither 1st nor 2nd edition had Will saves, which I'd referenced in Chapter 1. After some more research, I furthermore learned that saves in 1e and 2e made no damn sense, so I decided to permit myself the creative license to include 3.5e save mechanics; hence the Reflex save here and reference to Evasion (which is a Feat that makes no sense if there aren't Reflex Saves).

Also I'm aware that I completely omitted initiative; I did this partly because they never **really** entered into a back-and-forth battle state but mostly because turn-order combat makes for some damn dull writing.